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# *'Laughing a Folly out of Countenance'*

## Laughter and the Limits of Reform in Eighteenth-Century Satire

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At the heart of this volume is the opposition between two terms, corroding and binding, between the capacity of satire and laughter simultaneously to subvert authority and confront iniquity while also solidifying communities of readers. Nowhere was this opposition more carefully, anxiously or contentiously studied than the golden age of English satire, between the restoration of the Stuart monarchy in 1660 and the deaths of Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope in the middle of the eighteenth century. These debates targeted the nature of satire: what it was and what it was supposed to do. During this same period, a second philosophical dispute also opened up on the margins of literary, sociological and psychological theory about the nature and function of laughter. Both sides of these debates were eagerly and antagonistically argued: satirists were high-minded public moralists or they were vindictive lampooners; laughter was a form of splenetic superiority or merely a pleasing response to an innocuous incongruity.

This chapter is an attempt to trace those debates. But it is also an attempt to account for the ticklish relationship between satire and laughter more broadly from the perspective of recent psychological theories. In both eliciting laughter and solidifying communities, I claim, satirists were also offering a deeply affective experience for readers. According to most theorists then and today, satire was supposed to correct vice – either the vices of the satiric victim or those of the reader. But such a theory of satiric correction presupposes that readers and targets, having read a work of satire, will proactively apply the lessons of the work to themselves. Richard Morton has offered the pithiest articulation of this thesis: 'The aim of satire was reformation through perceptive ridicule. The satirist saw what was wrong with the world; the reader reciprocated by agreement and amendment.'[1] Critics of satire, however, have had severe doubts, both then and today, that there is any simple or straightforward transaction between reading satire and reforming vice. Readers might have laughed

[1] R. Morton, 'Satire and Reform', *Satire in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. J. D. Browning (New York, 1983): p. 1.



at satiric works and their victims, but many questioned whether those chortles so readily translated into an easily imbibed lesson or practical self-correction. In addition, recent work in the psychology of humour suggests that comic literature and laughter tend to induce in readers forms of cognitive disengagement that categorically prohibit goal-oriented behaviour and the reformation of vice. Satire might have been a system of ridicule and reform, its champions claimed, but it was one in desperate need of careful and constant recalibration – and one that produced at best, many argued, dubious reformative outcomes.

How, then, was this amalgam of satire and laughter supposed to work? Or, more accurately, if laughter was at odds with such reformative goals, how then, in fact, did it work? In an attempt to make sense of the functions of satire, I turn in closing to perhaps the most suspicious critic of the eighteenth century, the prankster at the margins of the stage, who with mock solemnity often offered the most sceptical criticisms of satire: Jonathan Swift. I turn to him not merely as a coyly sneering satirist, but as, perhaps paradoxically, one of satire's most optimistic practitioners. Swift was the one figure who suggested with caution, self-mockery and a hint of hope that satire might offer correction, if however indirectly. It did so not by eliciting readers' laughter and by building coalitions of self-satisfied ethical agreement and critical censure that in turn reformed victims and readers. Instead, satire was most effective when most difficult – when it challenged readers directly. His goal was not to 'divert' the world, as he explained to Pope, but to 'vex' it, to force readers to re-evaluate the received wisdom by which we all live.[2]

### Satire Between Theory and Practice

When attempting to rationalise the social and ethical functions of satire, authors and critics of the eighteenth century, along with scholars today, have often turned to John Dryden's *Discourse Concerning the Original and Progress of Satire* (1693). Dryden's goal was to account for the history of satire and to explain as a result 'how a Modern Satire shou'd be made'.[3] As part of that normative agenda, he needed to distinguish 'true Satires' (9) from a vernacular tradition of 'invective Poems' (48), the vitriolic manuscript lampoons that were simply everywhere in the last half of the seventeenth century.[4] As part of that distancing and recuperation, Dryden also argued that satire should conform to 'the two Ends of Poetry in general': 'Profit and Delight' (61) – or, as it was almost universally known in the eighteenth century, *utile et dulce*.

[2] Swift to Pope, 29 September 1725, *Correspondence of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Harold Williams, 5 vols (Oxford, 1963–65), II: 102.

[3] 'Discourse Concerning the Original and Progress of Satire', *The Works of John Dryden*, ed. A. B. Chambers, William Frost and Vinton A. Dearing, 20 vols (Berkeley, 1956–90): p. 4.78. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

[4] For example, see *Augustan Satirical Verse, 1660–1714*, ed. George DeF. Lord et al., 7 vols (New Haven, 1963–75); and *Court Satires of the Restoration*, ed. John Harold Wilson (Columbus, 1976). For an evaluation of these materials, see Harold Love, *English Clandestine Satire, 1660–1702* (Oxford, 2004).

Pleasure, the argument went, enabled satire's ultimate goal: instruction. Dryden, for instance, put humour and its attendant laughter front and centre in his definition of satire. According to him, ethically successful works of satire are general, not particular, attacking a man's corrigible foibles rather than the man himself through a kind of disinterested, audience-oriented laughter. 'The best and finest manner of Satire', he explained, ''Tis that sharp, well-manner'd way, of laughing a Folly out of Countenance' (81). This was the reformative function of satire: its ability to correct through ridicule the behaviour of either or both its victims and its readers.

Moreover, each of those terms – *sharp*, *well mannered*, *laughing* and *folly* – were heavily loaded for Dryden, abstractions he works to define throughout the *Discourse*. By 'sharp', he meant that it must be both clearly written and thematically focused. Part of the problem any satire faces is its opaqueness: 'Satire is a Poem of a difficult Nature in it self, and is not written to Vulgar Readers' (54).[5] In addition, 'sharpness' meant that satire attained its reformative aims through its own thematic unity: it attacked a specific vice and praised its opposite virtue – even if few satirists, Dryden included, ever reached the kind of thematic unity he proscribed or by which later critics have defined formal verse satire.[6]

For Dryden, style or tone was also a central formal feature of satire, one that helped to make a satire 'well-manner'd' or a kind of 'fine Raillery' (70). In short, a satire's ethics were intimately tied to its verbal method. As Dryden put it, in perhaps the most quoted passage from the *Discourse*:

> How easie is it to call [a man] Rogue and Villain, and that wittily! But how hard to make a Man appear a Fool, a Blockhead, or a Knave, without using any of those opprobrious terms! To spare the grossness of the Names, and to do the thing yet more severely, is to draw a full Face, and to make the Nose and Cheeks stand out, and yet not to employ any depth of Shadowing [...] there is still a vast difference betwixt the slovenly Butchering of a Man, and the fineness of a stroke that separates the Head from the Body, and leaves it standing in its place. (70–1)

This preoccupation with rhetorical method runs throughout the *Discourse*, intimately linking the efficacy and ethics of the attack with the obliqueness of the language used. As Dryden's sometime patron and collaborator John Sheffield, Lord Mulgrave (later duke of Buckingham) observed, satire is most effective not when it directly skewers its object but when it expresses itself in seemingly disinterested mock praise: 'Rage you must hide, and prejudice lay down:/ A Satyr's Smile is sharper than his Frown'.[7]

5 With their teasing ironies and mocking praise, even the Roman models proved difficult to understand. As Maria Plaza has remarked of Horace and Juvenal, 'the periphery of potentially subversive humour interferes with the central message so much as to blur the contours of this centre and render its shape difficult to grasp' (*The Function of Humour in Roman Verse Satire: Laughing and Lying* (Oxford, 2006): p. 2).

6 See Mary Claire Randolph, 'The Structural Design of the Formal Verse Satire', *Philological Quarterly*, 21 (1942): pp. 368–84.

7 J. Sheffield, *An Essay Upon Poetry* (London, 1682): p. 10.



Proscribing how a satire should be written was easy enough. But explaining how a satire, if written in accord with such rules, effectively reformed the world was a shakier proposition. For Dryden, careful stylistic and tonal attention, a 'fine Raillery', balanced by an intense focus, produced the laughter essential to discountenancing 'Folly'. This was a careful rhetorical balancing act, between a satire's sharpness and its manners, between its critical focus and coy language, which produced a satiric approach that enabled the laughter that corrected vice. As Horace put it, 'ridiculum acri/ fortius et melius magnas plerumque secat res' – or, as it was most often translated during the eighteenth century, 'For Ridicule shall frequently prevail,/ And cut the Knot, when graver Reasons fail'.[8]

This emphasis on laughter, both how it was to be elicited from a reader and its ultimate function, is at the heart of Dryden's theory of satire. Laughter was the means to the end of correction itself – it was the spoonful of sugar needed for such corrective medicine. Moreover, laughter became a consistent feature of later satiric theory. Literary critics have routinely argued that humour, or some sort of comic agent, is what distinguishes satire from mere invective.[9] But even Dryden was sceptical that laughter alone was simply enough to reform or that it could be so easily attained. Varro, for instance, was too 'studious of laughter [...] his business was more to divert his Reader, than to teach him' (47). Even Horace's 'perpetual Grinn' was to some degree ineffective: it was more likely to 'anger than amend a Man' (70).

Many writers and critics have also had their doubts that such a theory fully squares with satiric practice. If satire serves a corrective function, or even some other function beyond the bluntly didactic, then it would therefore need to shape the behaviour of its readers – it must try 'to make us move back to the world', as Michael Rosenblum has put it.[10] But, like laughter, so too does the correction of vice have its limits. For Dryden, follies were nothing more than 'little Vices [...] the defects of Humane Understanding, or at most the Peccadillos of Life, rather than the Tragical Vices' (62). As Swift put it:

> Reproach not though in jest a friend
> For those defects he cannot mend;
> His lineage, calling, shape or sense,
> If named with scorn, gives just offence.[11]

Moreover, such instruction was always limited by the subject's capacity for reform. Dryden conceded that merely lambasting some fool's moral weaknesses or hypocrisy

8 *The Satires of Horace*, trans. Philip Francis, 3 vols (London, 1746): p. 3.151. See also Horace, Book I, Satire 1.10, *Satires, Epistles, Art of Poetry*, trans. H. R. Fairclough (Cambridge, Mass., 1926): p. 117, where it is translated 'Jesting oft cuts hard knots more forcefully and effectively than gravity.'

9 See, for instance, Ashley Marshall, *The Practice of Satire in England, 1658–1770* (Baltimore, 2013): pp. 2–3.

10 M. Rosenblum, 'Pope's Illusive Temple of Infamy', *The Satirist's Art*, ed. H. James Jensen and Malvin Zirker (Bloomington, 1972): p. 32.

11 J. Swift, 'To Mr Delany', *The Complete Poems*, ed. Pat Rogers (New Haven, 1983), ll. 67–70.

was hardly enough to change him. Though perhaps for readers such admonition might be preventative:

> 'Tis an Action of Virtue to make Examples of Vicious Men. They may and ought to be upbraided with their Crimes and Follies: Both for their own amendment, if they are not yet incorrigible; and for the Terrour of others, to hinder them from falling into those Enormities, which they see are so severely punish'd, in the Persons of others. (60)

Some men were simply beyond correction. But readers might avoid the same moral failings not out of some ingrained moral obligation, but merely to prevent themselves from being made the victims of satiric exposure. The reader for whom such a theory of satiric reformation targets, as Robert C. Elliott might suggest, is the person who fears being publicly shamed but perhaps feels no private guilt.[12]

Nonetheless, following Dryden, many writers continued defensively to insist on satire's moral functions,[13] even if such defences could be wildly and predictably inconsistent.[14] Satirists simply recognised that explicit justifications were badly needed. Any survey of satire from this period, from our most canonised works to the down-market squibs largely unread today, cannot avoid the sneaking suspicion that many satires were fed by personal animus. Even Dryden's satiric poems, and especially *The Medall* and *Mac Flecknoe*, seem to have been written by an almost entirely different writer from the author of the *Discourse*. For all of its 'fine Raillery', it needs to be remembered that *Mac Flecknoe* was a nasty smear campaign against a rival with whom Dryden had tetchily bickered for years.[15] The critic John Dennis, in fact, was flabbergasted that anyone would take Dryden's mealy-mouthed rationalisations at face value. He saw his poems, including *Mac Flecknoe*, *The Medall* and *Absalom and Achitophel*, exactly for what they were: 'libels which have pass'd for Satires [...] They are indeed, if you please, beautiful Libels, but they are every where full of Flattery and Slander, and a just Satire admits of neither.'[16]

Dryden was not alone. Think only of Pope, whose smouldering personal feuds were often fodder for his public works. To read Pope's poetry solely through the lens of personal attack is, to some degree, to do a disservice to the genuine programme of moral reform that he hoped his satires might accomplish. Yet his poetry is so laden with memorable shots at particular individuals, rather than general types, that it is often difficult to read past the personal attacks to get at some easily identifiable moral instruction. One thinks of his viciously homophobic slur in *An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* against Lord Hervey (or Sporus, as he was known in the poem);[17] or his

12 R. Elliott, *The Power of Satire: Magic, Ritual, Art* (Princeton, 1960): p. 67.
13 See P. K. Elkin, *The Augustan Defence of Satire* (Oxford, 1973): pp. 71–89.
14 Marshall, *Practice of Satire*: pp. 48–53, 62.
15 See, for instance, Robert D. Hume, '"Satire" in the Reign of Charles II', *Modern Philology*, 102/3 (February 2005): p. 344.
16 J. Dennis, *The Characters and Conduct of Sir John Edgar* (London, 1720): p. 3.
17 *The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. John Butt, 11 vols (New Haven, 1939–69), 4, ll. 309–31. All citations of Pope's poetry come from this edition and are cited parenthetically by volume and line number.



repeated attacks on Hervey's close friend, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, as Sappho, her literary namesake.[18] Even his mild if deflating portrait of Dennis in the *Essay on Criticism* (1. ll 585–7) or his depiction of his former friend Joseph Addison, who showed up as the haughty, underhanded Atticus in *An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* (4. ll 201–2), make it hard to think of Pope as a disinterested public servant.

One could go on and on. Collectively, though, such portraits amount comparatively little to the dozens of figures attacked by name in the successive editions of the *Dunciad*. At the centre of those attacks are two key figures: first the editor-scholar Lewis Theobald in the *Dunciad* (1728) and *Dunciad Variorum* (1729) and then, later, the actor Colley Cibber in the *Dunciad in Four Books* (1743). But the poem is also laden throughout with a series of degrading portraits. All of this Pope ostensibly justified, albeit belatedly, in his *Epilogue to the Satires, Dialogue II* (1738). There he casts himself, as Helen Deutsch has remarked, 'as a hyper-masculine epic hero rejecting Horatian politeness and embodying solitary moral integrity in an age of beautiful social hypocrisy'.[19]

The successive versions of the *Dunciad*, however, make such high-handedness hard to swallow. In the first place, there is the question of whether the poem's targets needed to be named at all, if so many could simply be capriciously swapped in and out. As Edmund Curll acidly remarked in his key to the *Dunciad*, 'this Poem is to mimic a *Weather-Glass* and vary every Impression as the Author's Malice *Increases* to one, or *abates* to *Another*'.[20] One might argue, in fact, that Pope's general programme of moral reform in his satires is undermined or even overwhelmed by his pettish score-settling and vindictive one-upmanship. In many instances, his poems were best remembered then and are still remembered today for his capsule portraits of specific individuals – something that perhaps links his own poetic practice to the manuscript verse libels of the Restoration from which Dryden was so eager to distance 'true Satires' (9).[21]

The limits of reform: this was a problem every satirist faced when hoping to justify his most vindictive works. And those limits, even for practising satirists, felt very real. Almost a century after Dryden, Charles Abbot argued that satire 'may deter or punish, but will seldom correct or improve'.[22] In the eighteenth century, both theorists and practitioners came to rely on Dryden's articulation of satiric method – what it is, how it works and its functions.[23] Those later justifications often turned on the issue of satiric victims: who could be named and how, what vices or foibles could be lashed and what end such forms of comic exposure might serve. But such eggshell

18 See Valerie Rumbold, *Women's Place in Pope's World* (Cambridge, 1989): pp. 156–8.
19 H. Deutsch, 'Pope, Self, and World', *Cambridge Companion to Alexander Pope*, ed. Pat Rogers (Cambridge, 2007): p. 15.
20 E. Curll, *A Compleat Key to the Dunciad* (London, 1728): p. 22.
21 See, for instance, Harold Love, *The Culture and Commerce of Texts: Scribal Publication in Seventeenth-century England* (Amherst, 1993), ch. 6.
22 Charles Abbot, *An Essay On the Use and Abuse of Satire* (London, 1786): p. 1.
23 Howard D. Weinbrot, *Eighteenth-Century Satire: Essays on Text and Context from Dryden to Peter Pindar* (Cambridge, 1988): pp. 1–7.

distinctions could at times feel feeble, even naively wishful. As Simon Dickie has observed, the 'insistent symmetries of these formulas' tend to 'obscure an untidy reality'.[24] In short, such a theory fit at best poorly with how satire was practised across the Restoration and eighteenth century.[25]

Moreover, the limits of correction led to the sneaking suspicion that even the finest works of satire were grossly ineffective. After decades in the trenches of satiric battle, even Pope despaired of his life's work while carving out space for himself as the last-standing soldier of virtue. As he wrote, 'A Knave's a Knave, to me, in ev'ry State,/ Alike my scorn, if he succeed or fail' (4. ll 361–2). A less sanguine Swift, writing from the vantage point of 1735, could lament that *Gulliver's Travels* had had no effect on 'reforming the *Yahoo* Race'.[26] Samuel Johnson had similar doubts, remarking sceptically of *Hudibras*, 'What effect this poem had upon the publick, whether it shamed imposture, or reclaimed credulity, is not easily determined.'[27] Even John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, one of the most widely performed plays of the eighteenth century, had dubious results. It was an 'unexampled success', both commercially and aesthetically, as Johnson observed.[28] But hardly did that mean that the play's satire had done anything significant in the world, whether good *or* bad, even if, as Swift had claimed, the play had 'placed all kinds of vice in the strongest and most odious light'. As Johnson countered, 'The piece, like many others, was plainly written only to divert, without any moral purpose; and is therefore not likely to do good; nor can it be conceived, without more speculation than life requires or admits, to be productive of much evil.'[29]

Satire might have failed to reform the world, but for many onlookers its effect was even worse: an ugly indulgence in our endemic anti-sociality. The translator Edward Burnaby Greene, for instance, was 'inclined to think that satire has rarely done any essential good', claiming that:

> the attempt to laugh people out of their vices will be found, I am a little apprehensive, not a little deficient to answer the end proposed; the only end to which it can be subservient being to exercise a wanton indiscriminate spirit of ridicule, tending rather, as indeed generally desing'd, to shew the wit of the satirist, than the means of the delinquent's reformation.[30]

The history of satire for many was nothing more than defamation dressed in the high-handed language of moral correction. As one writer quipped in the extended metaphor that undergirds his scatological history of satire, *The Famous British Shitters*:

[24] Simon Dickie, *Cruelty and Laughter: Forgotten Comic Literature and the Unsentimental Eighteenth Century* (Chicago, 2011): p. 58.
[25] Marshall, *Practice of Satire*: pp. 289–303.
[26] *Gulliver's Travels*, ed. David Womersley, *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jonathan Swift*, 17 vols (Cambridge, 2010–): p. 14.
[27] 'Life of Butler', *The Lives of the Poets*, ed. John H. Middendorf, in *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, 23 vols (New Haven, 1958–): p. 21.224.
[28] 'Life of Gay', *Works of Samuel Johnson*, p. 22.797. For Gay, see Chapter 6, this volume.
[29] 'Life of Gay', pp. 799–800.
[30] Edward Burnaby Greene, *The Satires of Juvenal Paraphrastically Imitated* (London, 1763): p. v.



> In filthy and excrementitious Vein,
> Our modern uninstructed *Authors* strain; [...]
> Insipid their Productions, in a word,
> The same in Substance, as a vulgar T–d.[31]

Satire might have been a means of 'laughing a Folly out of Countenance', but writers and critics were less certain. As Dustin Griffin has argued, Dryden's 'theory [of satire] represents not so much what satire was and had been as what Dryden and his followers wanted it to be'.[32] This was a gulf between theory and practice that even Dryden himself admits at points, and one still present in the proscriptive definition of satire that Johnson was to give some sixty years later. Like Dryden, he defined satire as: 'A poem in which wickedness or folly is censured. Proper *satire* is distinguished, by the generality of its reflections, from a *lampoon* which is aimed against a particular person', but was willing to admit that this crisp generic distinction was 'too frequently confounded'.[33] Critics today have sometimes been just as doubtful. As Blakey Vermeule has put it, 'satire bakes no bread, nor does it unseat any governments'.[34]

The larger and more important question, however, is what satire was supposed to do, rather than how it was supposed to be written. Why did it fail to accomplish its reformative ends? Why did practice align so shabbily with theory? And if satire failed to perform its largely theoretical and high-minded corrective functions, as so many have argued both then and today, what in fact did it do?

## *Quid Rides?*: Laughter and its Discontents

Such personal satires could at times be uproariously funny, eliciting deep peals of laughter from their readers (provided, of course, that those same readers were not also the victims). As we saw with Dryden, such laughter was the vehicle of satire's reformative function. Indeed, for the most optimistic critics – usually those who also wrote and thus needed to justify the vindictive elements in such works – the laughter elicited by satire served two possible functions: either to correct the foibles (or at worst vices) of the victim, or to guide the reader towards a proper course of moral or ethical behaviour.

Any account of satire's ostensible reformative functions faced a critical problem, however. In the first place, as we saw, satirists and their critics had profound doubts about the efficacy of satire. Such laughter, as many argued, was merely an end in itself rather than the aesthetic mechanism that allowed a reader to imbibe a lesson on the way to practical application. That scepticism was about the comic tools of satire: that laughter itself was inherently at odds with satire's ostensibly public-minded goals.

[31] *A Sequel to the Dunciad: Being The Famous British Sh–rs. A Satire* (London, 1729): p. 22.
[32] Dustin Griffin, *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction* (Lexington, 1994): p. 21.
[33] *Samuel Johnson's Dictionary: A Modern Selection*, ed. E. L. McAdam, Jr. and George Milne (New York, 1964): p. 357.
[34] B. Vermeule, *Party of Humanity: Writing Moral Psychology in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Baltimore, 2000): p. 96.

That scepticism about laughter's functions had, moreover, deep-seated philosophical roots. In what follows I lay out those doubts, especially among a second group of philosophers and critics, those concerned with the psychology of humour and laughter. Such writers raised troubling questions about what humour was supposed to do and whether laughter was categorically prohibited from producing positive reformative or social outcomes. Such an account of humour and laughter has important consequences for thinking functionally about satire. Satire might have been a means of 'laughing a Folly out of Countenance', as Dryden put it, but his largely optimistic take on the utility of laughter was, at the time, wholly exceptional.

It is worth remembering that throughout antiquity, and all the way up to the eighteenth century, many routinely doubted laughter's capacity to serve a positive social function.[35] For Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and Quintilian alike, laughter was often too intimately coupled with and perhaps indistinguishable from ridicule.[36] To put it in our own terms, one always seemed to laugh at, rather than with, someone. For obvious reasons, this was undesirable. But it also hinted at an insidiously anti-social element in human nature, a kind of inborn malevolence in need of careful management. Many, in fact, found laughter inseparable from malice – what Ronald de Sousa has called laughter's 'phthonic' dimension, from the Greek ('*phthonos*'), meaning 'malicious envy'.[37] René Descartes, for instance, found ridicule and scorn was 'a kind of joy mixed with hatred, which results from our perceiving some small evil in a person whom we consider to deserve it'.[38]

For critics in the eighteenth century and today, the nastiness associated with laughter during this period was most clearly articulated by Thomas Hobbes, who argued early on that: 'The passion of Laughter is nothing else but a suddaine Glory arising from suddaine Conception of some Eminency in our selves by Comparison with the Infirmityes of others, or with our owne formerly.'[39] Readers both in the eighteenth century and up to today have, however, tended to read this passage selectively, isolating his notion of the 'suddaine Glory' in our 'Eminency' over others while neglecting the self-censure of own former 'Infirmityes'. That is, creeping behind our laughter, even at others, is an awareness of how we ourselves might have been laughed at. Moreover, Hobbes's theory hardly fits so cleanly within the

35 John Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Laughter* (Malden, 2009): pp. 91–2.

36 See above, Introduction, pp. 000 and Chapter 5, pp. 000. Quintilian, *The Orator's Education*, ed. and trans. Donald A. Russell, 4 vols (Cambridge, Mass., 2002), 3, bk 6, ch. 3, pp. 66–7; Socrates, *Philebus*, rpt. *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humour*, ed. John Morreall (Albany, 1987): pp. 10, 12; Aristotle, 'Nicomacheon Ethics', *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, 2 vols (Princeton, 1984), 2, bk. 4, sect. 8, l. 1128a30, p. 1780 and 'Rhetoric', *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 2, bk. 12, ll. 1389b11, p. 2214. These views are not as consistent as is often thought, however. See Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour* (London, 2005): pp. 38–9; Mary Beard, *Laughter in Ancient Rome: On Joking, Tickling and Cracking Up* (Berkeley, 2014): pp. 29–36.

37 R. de Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion* (Cambridge, 1987): pp. 289–95.

38 'The Passions of the Soul', *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch, 3 vols (Cambridge, 1985), 1.393, sect. 178.

39 T. Hobbes, *The Elements of Law Natural and Politic*, ed. Ferdinand Tönnies, 2nd edn (London, 1969): p. 42.



box of Superiority Theory.[40] Later, Hobbes returned to the question of laughter in *Leviathan*, expanding and refining both elements of his account – that we do laugh at others, but that such laughter also reveals some anxious recognition of self in the person doing the laughing:

> *Sudden Glory*, is the passion which maketh those *Grimaces* called LAUGHTER; and is caused by either some sudden act of their own, that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves. And it is incident most to them, that are most conscious of the fewest abilities in themselves; who are forced to keep themselves in their own favour, by observing the imperfections of other men. And therefore much Laughter at the defects of others, is a signe of Pusillanimity. For of great minds, one of the proper workes is, to help and free others from scorn; and compare themselves onely with the most able.[41]

For Hobbes, laughter arises when either we do something, even something totally innocuous, that pleases us, or when we compare ourselves 'to some deformed thing in another'. Many have chosen to emphasise this latter, crueler account of laughter, though, while neglecting his observation that the person most likely to laugh is he or she possessing the 'fewest abilities' – those faint-hearted cowards, lacking courage or fortitude, a kind of moral weakness, or 'Pusillanimity'.[42]

That Hobbes was to some degree ambivalent about laughter – he refused to reduce it *only* to that sudden glory of superiority – hardly mattered in the long run. Critics in the eighteenth century were just as likely as us today to caricature Hobbes's deeply cynical view of human nature. Francis Hutcheson, for instance, rejected the equation of laughter and superiority. As he put it, 'the cause of laughter is the bringing together of images which have contrary additional ideas, as well as some resemblance in the principal idea: this contrast between ideas of grandeur, dignity, sanctity, perfection, and ideas of meanness, baseness, profanity'.[43]

This newfound conception of incongruity at the heart of humour was part of a radical post-Hobbesian rethinking of laughter. Again, it is worth keeping in mind that the very existence of laughter for many onlookers was a physiological and seemingly involuntary rebuke to a Shaftesburian conception of the inborn goodness of human nature – the so-called '*sensus communis*' or natural human inclination to 'the common interest, love of the community or society, natural affection, humanity, obligingness, or that sort of civility which rises from a just sense of the common rights of mankind'.[44] There was something very ugly about laughter, and it was Hobbes who cautiously articulated an idea about the inherent viciousness of human

40 See Quentin Skinner, 'Why Laughing Mattered in the Renaissance', *History of Political Thought*, 22 (2001): pp. 445–6.

41 T. Hobbes, *Leviathan, or The Matter, Forme, & Power of a Common-wealth Ecclesiasticall and Civill*, ed. Ian Shapiro (New Haven, 2010): pt. I, ch. vi, 37–8.

42 OED online (Oxford, 2016) <oed.com>.

43 F. Hutcheson, *Reflections Upon Laughter* (Glasgow, 1751): p. 19.

44 Anthony Ashley Cooper, Lord Shaftesbury, 'Sensus Communis, An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour in a Letter to a Friend', *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, ed. Lawrence E. Klein (Cambridge, 1999): p. 48, see esp. pp. 48–51.

nature that perhaps only lingered at the periphery of social consciousness. Hutcheson's conception in turn gave laughter an intellectual innocence: it was a pleasure in disparity itself, rather than the disparity between people. Such a reconceptualisation reduced a once socially divisive and even latently vindictive act down to a mere cognitive pleasure in language.

Such a shift in thinking brings us closer to the emergence of what has been called incongruity theory, which came in large measure to dominate theories of humour from the latter half of the eighteenth century onwards.[45] It holds that humour, rather than being the aggressive by-product of some vindictive expression of superiority, is produced through comic mismatches and the violation of mental patterns and expectations. Immanuel Kant, for instance, claimed: 'Laughter is an affect arising from a strained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing.'[46] In a similar way, Arthur Schopenhauer found that the source of laughter was the 'very incongruity [between] sensuous and abstract knowledge', because 'the latter always merely approximates to the former'. We laugh, 'in every case', upon 'the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation'.[47] Even supposedly superior laughter, however, could be understood as an expression of this incongruity:

> the laughter of others at what we do or say seriously offends us so keenly depends on the fact that it asserts that there is a great incongruity between our conceptions and the objective realities [...] The laugh of scorn announces with triumph to the baffled adversary how incongruous were the conceptions he cherished with the reality which is now revealing itself to him.[48]

For Søren Kierkegaard, the entire source of the 'comical' was incongruity – or what he called 'contradiction'.[49]

In the eighteenth century, though, even this emerging theory of comic incongruity appeared to onlookers just as partial as any one-dimensional notion of superiority. Despite Hutcheson's claim that humour was simply an 'overstraining of wit', he was forced to concede that we sometimes laugh at the most horrifying things, such as 'the contortions of the human body in air, upon the blowing up of an enemy's ship'.[50] And even if we ought to abhor the barbarity of such laughter, we cannot deny its existence. There it is, plain as day: in an involuntary laugh at the suffering of another – all the unregulated ugliness and social divisiveness of a creeping superiority.

Moreover, those claiming that humour was fundamentally a pleasure in incongruity

45 Morreall, *Comic Relief*, pp. 9–15.
46 I. Kant, *The Critique of Judgement* (1791), ed. Nicholas Walker, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford, 2007): p. 161.
47 A. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea* (1818; 1844), trans. R. B. Haldane and J. Kemp, 6th edn (London, 1907), bk I, sect. 13.
48 Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, supplement to bk. I, ch. 8.
49 S. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846), trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton, 1941): pp. 459–68.
50 Hutcheson, *Reflections upon Laughter*: p. 30.



often had tremendous difficulty isolating the innocuous element of burlesque from the ridicule implied in our laughter at particular people or even general types. The examples offered by such theorists, in fact, tend to undermine any account of laughter that overemphasises its ethically neutral elements. Francis Grose, for instance, in his hunt for incongruous examples, found himself rummaging around in the stockpile of comic characters, including 'a cowardly soldier, a bandy-legged dancing-master, a corpulent or gouty running-footman, an antiquated fop or coquet, a methodist in a brothel, a drunken justice making a riot'. [51] But even these examples tend to undermine any crisp distinction between our laughter at individuals and our laughter at the incongruity that ostensibly made them so funny. This was the riddle that almost every apologist for laughter faced. Any post-Hobbesian theory of laughter that fails to recognise the perhaps not essential but commonly phthonic element in laughter, especially in laughing at such deeply personal satires, does so in contradistinction. Such accounts about how we laugh now, as Mary Beard has argued, are 'loaded stories of human progress and refinement'. For such storytellers, 'part of the point was to show that their predecessors had laughed more coarsely, or more lustily, than they did'.[52]

In addition, incongruity theory might have shifted the argument from one of endemic human nastiness to a mere pleasure in burlesque inappropriateness – at least for some thinkers – but hardly did this improve their view of laughter itself. The philosopher David Hartley, for instance, also felt the primary source of 'Mirth, Wit, and Humour' was incongruity, and especially the 'apparent and partial Agreements and Disagreements, as in Words, and indirect accidental Circumstances'. But even this passion for incongruity could lead to intellectual dissipation. By hunting after such false associations, he argued, 'a Man must by degrees pervert all his Notions of Things themselves'. Laughter in itself might not be wholly pernicious, he conceded, but even incongruity could entail our superior laughter at such things as 'the Mistakes and Follies of Children'.[53] The larger problem for Hartley was laughter's short- and long-term effects: it displaced actual thought in the moment and intellectually corrupted those habitually disposed to mirth.

What needs to be kept in mind is that, for many in the eighteenth century, whether Hobbes's ideas about laughter were a combination of 'palpable Absurdity' and 'ill-natur'd Nonsense', as one commentator put it, his argument needed to be rejected.[54] As Stuart M. Tave has observed, in the wake of Hobbes many writers 'were intent upon denying the unpleasant qualities of laughter, confuting the arguments that tend to equate it with self-love, ridicule, and animosity, and who are eager to set up their own counter-theory to prove its amiable nature'.[55] The intensity with

51 F. Grose, *Rules for Drawing Caricaturas: With An Essay on Comic Painting* (London, 1788): p. 22.
52 Beard, *Laughter in Ancient Rome*, p. 50.
53 D. Hartley, *Observations on Man*, 2 vols (London, 1749), 1: p. 440.
54 [James Arbuckle], no. 10 (5 June 1725), *Hibernicus's Letters*, 2 vols (London, 1734), 1: p. 78.
55 S. M. Tave, *The Amiable Humorist: A Study in the Comic Theory and Criticism of the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* (Chicago, 1960): p. 56.

which this minor argument in Hobbes's corpus was singled out for attack, however, perhaps signals less a uniform eighteenth-century belief in its endemic wrongness than a latent admission that perhaps Hobbes had got something right about not only laughter but also human psychology more generally. When combatting Hobbes, for instance, incongruity theorists such as James Beattie were flabbergasted that such superior laughter could be endorsed by not only an egoist like Bernard Mandeville but also someone like Joseph Addison.[56]

The belief that at least some forms of humour involved a Hobbesian denigration of others endured throughout the eighteenth century, though attempts were made to isolate this less desirable trait. This often required careful semantic parsing. For some, the mistake was not to associate laughter with superiority but to assume that all forms of laughter entailed it. Such derisive laughter, some contended, was nothing more than a subspecies of laughter better known as ridicule.[57] And ridicule, as one critic put it, was a 'weapon' that could 'cut indiscriminately, right or wrong'.[58] Indeed, such nasty laughter should be thought of as 'wit' rather than 'humour'.[59] As Corbyn Morris argued, one needed to distinguish between good-hearted and gentle raillery and the brutal admonition of ridicule.[60] For Swift, the distinction was clear, even if the signal often got lost in the noise of dullness:

> So, the pert dunces of mankind
> Whene'er they would be thought refined,
> Because the difference lies abstruse
> 'Twixt raillery and gross abuse,
> To show their parts, will scold and rail,
> Like porters o'er a pot of ale.[61]

This meticulous parsing, this anxious desire to isolate ridicule, was nonetheless often easier said than done, as many in the eighteenth century were forced to concede and as many critics of laughter have since argued.[62] It was particularly difficult to

[56] James Beattie, *Essay on Laughter, and Ludicrous Composition*, in *Essays* (Edinburgh, 1776), pp. 332–5. For Addison's discussion of Hobbes, see nos 47 (24 April 1711) and, more sceptically, 249 (15 December 1711), in *The Spectator*, ed. Donald F. Bond, 5 vols (Oxford, 1965), 1: pp. 200–4; and 2: pp. 465–69.

[57] See, for instance, Beattie, *Essay on Laughter*, 1: p. 845; [Arbuckle], no. 10 (5 June 1725), *Hibernicus's Letters*; or Henry Home, Lord Kames, *Elements of Criticism* (Edinburgh, 1762), 1: p. 341.

[58] *The Hypochondriack*, no. 57 (Nov. 1782).

[59] Daniel Wickberg, *Senses of Humor: Self and Laughter in Modern America* (Ithaca, 1998): p. 36.

[60] C. Morris, *An Essay Towards Fixing the True Standards of Wit, Humour, Raillery, Satire, and Ridicule* (London, 1744): pp. 36–8.

[61] Swift, 'To Mr Delany', ll. 45–50.

[62] See, for example, Sigmund Freud, who acknowledged the existence of 'innocent' jokes, but found most jokes 'tendentious': that is, obscene, aggressive, hostile or cynical (*Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, 24 vols [New York, 1956–74]: pp. 106–46); Roger Scruton and Peter Jones, who argue that 'laughter de-values its object in the subject's eyes' and that such 'de-valuing' is 'the amusement itself' ('Laughter', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society: Supplementary Volumes* 56 [1982]: pp. 208–9); or Charles R. Gruner, who argues that aggression undergirds all forms of joking, even puns and riddles, which lead to contests of one-upmanship with winners and losers (*The Game of Humor: A Comprehensive Theory of Why We Laugh* (New Brunswick, 1997): p. 136).



extricate and quarantine this subspecies of laughter when present in satiric works. For many, ridicule and satire went hand in hand. As Samuel Johnson put it in 1750, 'Wit, cohabitating with Malice, had a son named Satire.'[63] Moreover, any careful parsing at the level of satiric theory was likely to be stymied in practice.[64]

All of this brings us back to the pregnant question that preoccupied satirists and critics from at least antiquity to the eighteenth century: *Quid rides?*[65] Satiric works might have provided, at least theoretically speaking, a simple model for Dryden, who found 'the best and finest manner of Satire [...] 'Tis that sharp, well-manner'd way, of laughing a Folly out of Countenance.' But, as so many critics of laughter anxiously observed in the succeeding century, too much was simply left in readers' hands after their laughter ceased. Even Dryden acknowledged this stumbling block. As he put it, 'They who endeavour not to correct themselves, according to so exact a Model; are just like the Patients, who have open before them a Book of Admirable Receipts, for their Diseases, and please themselves with reading it, without Comprehending the Nature of the Remedies; or how to apply them to their Cure' (75).

Readers of satire were simply too willing to delight in the ridicule provided rather than the instruction. This, of course, was a problem all the way back to Horace, who pungently asked: 'quid rides? mutato nomine de te fabula narratur' ('Why do you laugh? Change the name and the story is about you').[66] Even here we have hints of both sides of Hobbes's theory: our willingness to laugh at others, and yet the lurking implication that we too might be subjected to the same laughter. As one commentator explained, 'as long as the Satyr is not directly and bluntly levell'd at us; our *Self-love* waves the Application, and makes us find a Secret Satisfaction in seeing others ridicul'd'.[67] As Richard Morton has pungently observed, 'Satire, almost by definition, is about other people.'[68]

For the major satirists of the eighteenth century, and for its critics, satire should have served a clear function through a stable set of formal qualities. And yet the complication remained that satire was at best a paradoxical system of criticism and correction, and one in need of constant recalibration and reassessment. Laughter should have been nothing more than a pleasurable means to a reformative end. Yet it seemed to many critics that the end satire served was only laughter itself – and such laughter at others, as so many were forced to acknowledge, if only in part, was

[63] 'The Rambler', 22 (2 June 1750), ed. W. J. Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss, *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, 23 vols (New Haven, 1958–): pp. 3.123-4.

[64] See Christopher Vilmar, 'Johnson's Criticism of Satire and the Problem of the Scriblerians', *Cambridge Quarterly*, 38/1 (2009): pp. 7–8.

[65] See, for example, the epigraph to *An Essay on Laughter* (London, 1769).

[66] Horace, *Satires, Epistles, Art of Poetry*, trans. H. R. Fairclough (Cambridge, 1926), I, satire 1.1, ll. 69–70.

[67] Preface, *The English Theophrastus*, 2nd edn. (London, 1706): p. iii.

[68] Morton, 'Satire and Reform': p. 2.

more likely to serve ridicule than reform. When assessing the relationship between satire and laughter, many writers and critics returned to the question that had been asked for millennia but that satirists had answered at best feebly and wishfully – the same question that Horace had asked but to which, it seemed, the wrong answer was always returned: why are you laughing?

## Vexing the World: Satire, Laughter, Affect

Theoretical defences of satire and laughter were for many, however, just that – theories detached from practice. Many satirists and their commentators questioned the efficacy of satire, while philosophers and critics anxiously wrung their hands over the seeming anti-sociality of laughter. In this final section, I turn away from normative claims about satiric reformation and turn to readers. Granted, readers were equally implicated in the shady ethics of satire – the pleasure such works produced was more likely to tickle readers with the frisson of scandalous exposure than push them ineluctably towards a high-minded ethics of correction. As I argue below, this miscalibration of reader response might in part be explained by recent psychological research that suggests that the playful cognitive states produced by humour and satire categorically prohibit reformation.

Such a doubtful reading might throw additional cold water on the corrective potential of both satire and laughter. Yet perhaps there is another way we might think about satiric correction – one more circuitous and less defensive about its capacity for reform. This secondary, more residual theory also implicates readers, suggesting that satire works in subtler long-term ways, by inducing in readers a kind of critical habitus. To get at this more optimistic view of satiric reformation, I turn in closing to Jonathan Swift, perhaps the most sceptical of the eighteenth-century satirists. A Swiftian theory, while far from certain, perhaps offers us another way to think about satire's reformative functions – one isolated from its temporary comedic effects or even direct moral didacticism but connected to the role that readers play as they come to consider their own role in the production of satiric meaning.

Rethinking the reformative function of satire and the role readers might play is important, for so much eighteenth-century theory openly acknowledges that the pleasure afforded by such works often overwhelmed their instruction. Even Dryden found himself evaluating satiric works by his affective responses, while acknowledging that such emotional reactions should only serve the higher objective of correction. 'Pleasure is one of the Ends of Poetry', he admits, but 'it is only a means of compassing the only end, which is Instruction' (88). What should be clear, however, is that that pleasure for Dryden was necessary even if insufficient. Hence his claim that the formal qualities of poetry intensified their 'Transports' (64):

> I must confess, that the Delight which *Horace* gives me, is but languishing [...] he cannot provoke me to any Laughter [...] *Juvenal* is of a more vigorous and Masculine Wit, he gives me as much Pleasure as I can bear: He fully satisfies my Expectation, he Treats his Subject home: His Spleen is rais'd, and he raises mine: I have the Pleasure of Concernment in all he says; He drives his Reader along with him; and when he is at the end of his way, I willingly stop with him. (63)



Throughout the passage – perhaps the most personal section in the entire *Discourse* – affect comes to dominate. For someone like the philosopher Ted Cohen, speaking of jokes in particular, this is the very goal of humour: it creates an affective 'intimacy' between teller and listener. As Cohen puts it, 'a deep satisfaction in successful joke transactions is the sense held mutually by teller and hearer that they are joined in feeling'.[69] Instruct and delight might have been the catch-all explanation for what poetry ought to do, but it should also be clear from Dryden's account of his own emotional engagement with Juvenal that there is a deeply and perhaps primarily affective rather than didactic component to reading works of satire. Critic after critic argued that instruction was essential but nearly impossible without the utmost delight. Yet such delight in many ways is prohibitive, even precognitive: it is the wave of pleasure upon which the reader is borne, perhaps never to arrive on the shore of instruction.

Rather than being complementary, then, instruction and pleasure were oppositional. This is the great difficulty facing any theory of satiric reformation like Dryden's. As we saw in the last section, laughter could be interpreted as a deeply ugly response, one that belied an anti-social, inborn superiority. But even some of laughter's staunchest defenders, who pointed to the superficial selectivity of superiority theory, were forced to acknowledge the cognitively degenerative dangers of humour and laughter. As David Hartley argued, even innocent humour had the tendency to 'beget a Levity and Dissipation of Mind', and thus 'disqualify the Mind for the Pursuit after Truth, and attending to the useful, practical Relations of Things [...] the State of the Brain which accompanies Mirth cannot subsist long, or return frequently, without injuring it'.[70] Laughter, in fact, could categorically prohibit the kind of personal or outward-oriented reformation that satiric laughter supposedly enabled for Dryden and that was essential to satire's reformative ends.

Further, recent research in psychology has suggested, *contra* Dryden and the many critics who fought a rear-guard action to redeem laughter, that humour produces forms of cognitive disengagement, an issue hinted at in Dryden's emphasis on his own pleasure in reading satire. John Morreall, for instance, has argued that all laughter, the product of a kind of intellectual play, necessitates cognitive disengagement: we do not think when we laugh. 'Satire is not a weapon of revolutionaries. Humour involves cognitive as well as practical disengagement [...] The creator of humour puts ideas into our heads not to communicate information, but for the delight those ideas bring.'[71] That delight in and even indifference to the consequences of laughter lead to what the philosopher Henri Bergson has called 'a momentary anesthesia of the heart'.[72] And this mismatch between laughter and function, for William Prynne, was the paradox behind the most savage stage comedies, even when they ostensibly lashed vice for the benefit of theatregoers. Such depictions 'should rather provoke

69 Ted Cohen, *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters* (Chicago, 1999): pp. 4, 25.
70 D. Hartley, *Observations on Man*, 2 vols (London, 1749), 2: p. 252.
71 Morreall, *Comic Relief*: pp. 101–2.
72 H. Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York, 1914): p. 5.

the Actors, the Spectators to penitent sobs, then wanton smiles; to brinish teares then carnall solace'.[73]

Recent psychological research has offered further support that humour prohibits practical engagement. Michael J. Apter's 'reversal theory', for instance, suggests that humour produces cognitive states contrary to goal-oriented activities. According to Apter, humour is a non-serious activity involving play.[74] Such playful states of mind are 'paratelic' – present and non-goal-oriented, rather than future and goal-oriented ('telic'). Importantly, paratelic states engage us cognitively. Like earlier theorists of laughter, Apter argues that humour requires an individual to hold in mind two contradictory or incongruous ideas or concepts simultaneously, a cognitive process he calls 'identity synergy'.[75]

Such synergy, however, has a pernicious consequence, one detrimental to cognitive engagement *outside* of the conditions of play: 'When the individual is in a paratelic state he behaves because he enjoys the behaviour in itself and, where goals are involved, these are seen by him as being freely chosen or adopted by him and in some sense inessential.'[76] As Apter writes, in play:

> we seem to create a small and manageable private world which we may, of course, share with others; and this world is one in which, temporarily at least, nothing outside has any significance, and into which the outside world of real problems cannot properly impinge. If the 'real world' does enter in some way, it is transformed and sterilized in the process so that it is no longer truly itself, and can do no harm.[77]

Because humour induces paratelic states that are present and non-goal-oriented, humour also has an important anaesthetising effect: it engages us cognitively in understanding the incongruity so fundamental to post-Hobbesian accounts of humour and laughter, but in so doing prohibits us from thinking *outside* of the conditions of play to the serious world beyond the present moment. As Apter writes, the comprehension of incongruity, or an identity synergy, 'represents an escape, or at least a playful escape, from logic'.[78]

Apter's theory of reversals between paratelic and telic states of mind has important consequences for thinking about satire, humour and laughter. Many eighteenth-century theorists were anxious to distance laughter from the supposed superiority

[73] W. Prynne, *Histrio-Mastix: The Players Scourge, or, Actors Tragaedie* (London, 1633): p. 291. On the Elizabethan association between satire and stage comedy, see Griffin, *Satire*: pp. 10–12.

[74] Michael J. Apter, 'A Structural-Phenomenology of Play', *Adult Play: A Reversal Theory Approach*, ed. J. H. Kerr and Michael J. Apter (Amsterdam, 1989): p. 13. See also Max Eastman, *The Enjoyment of Laughter* (New York, 1936); William Fry, *Sweet Madness: A Study of Humor* (Palo Alto, 1963); and D. E. Berlyne, 'Laughter, Humour, and Play', *The Handbook of Social Psychology*, ed. G. Lindzey and E. Aronson, 2nd edn. 4 vols (Reading, 1969), 3: pp. 795–852.

[75] M. Apter, *The Experience of Motivation: The Theory of Psychological Reversals* (London, 1982): p. 185; and M. Apter and K. C. P. Smith, 'Humour and the Theory of Psychological Reversals', *It's a Funny Thing, Humour*, ed. Anthony J. Chapman and Hugh C. Foot (Oxford, 1977): p. 96.

[76] Apter and Smith, 'Humour and the Theory of Psychological Reversals': p. 95.

[77] Apter, 'A Structural-Phenomenology of Play': p. 14.

[78] Apter and Smith, 'Humour and the Theory of Psychological Reversals': p. 98.



that Hobbes had in part ascribed to it. They instead claimed that the source of humour was incongruity. Such a line of argument, if taken at face value, had the tendency to render laughter innocuous: it was only the unexpected comparison of differences, often merely verbal, that was the source of humour.

If humour forces us into paratelic states of mind, however, even an innocuous incongruity theory points to one of the most troubling problems for normative accounts of satire's function. For Dryden, satire needed to please if it were ever to instruct. But that pleasure, if produced by humour, should necessarily preclude 'real world' cognitive engagement. Such paratelic states, remember, are ends in themselves: they are present and non-goal-oriented. In effect, a work of satire that successfully 'pleases' us, or induces in us a paratelic state, should also fail to 'instruct' us or place us in a motivated or future-oriented telic state. Even Addison was willing to admit that laughter, for all the 'frequent Reliefs' it provided and despite its tendency towards malice, had negative cognitive consequences. 'Laughter, while it lasts', he explained, 'slackens and unbraces the Mind, weakens the Faculties, and causes a Kind of Remissness and Dissolution in all Powers of the Soul.'[79]

In satire, then, to please is thus not to instruct, but to prohibit instruction altogether. Rather than working in tandem, as Dryden claimed, pleasure and instruction worked against each other, fighting to produce in a reader opposite frames of mind. For Dryden, pleasure was a necessary but insufficient condition for instruction; but, as Apter and later researchers have shown, the pleasure produced by humour necessarily precludes instruction by inducing a state of mind contrary to active reformation.[80]

I have gone over Apter's theory at some length to articulate an important psychological dimension to humour that has, in my view, massive consequences for any functionalist theory of satire that suggests that humour, or satire's supposed pleasure, enables the instruction that a work of satire ultimately performs. Reversal theory suggests, instead, that a satire's constituent humour actually prohibits, rather than facilitates, instruction by inducing in readers paratelic states of mind. Such psychological research in fact seems to correspond with a sceptical line of argument against satire that has been present throughout its entire history, and one that gained intensity as satirists increasingly sought to justify their most scathing and seemingly personal works. Recall Edward Burnaby Greene's sneaking suspicion that 'the attempt to laugh people out of their vices will be found [...] not a little deficient to answer the end proposed'.[81]

The point to be kept in view is how this later scepticism participates in an Apterian critique of humour itself – in the creeping belief that the comic reductionism of satiric method is largely at odds with its ostensible goal of moral instruction. As Dustin Griffin has remarked, satiric reductions:

[79] 249 (15 December 1711), *The Spectator*: p. 2.466.

[80] See, for instance, Robert S. Wyer, Jr., and James Collins, 'A Theory of Humor Elicitation', *Psychological Review*, 99/4 (1992): pp. 663–88; and Wyer, *Social Comprehension and Judgment: The Role of Situation Models, Narratives, and Implicit Theories* (Mahwah, 2004), ch. 8.

[81] *Satires of Juvenal*: p. v.

> enable both satirist and reader to grasp complex matter, to arrive at a judgment of it, and thereby to master it. This sense of mastery (while it lasts) brings with it some relief from the burdens of complexity, a pleasure that we have proved ourselves more than equal to a difficult task of understanding and assessment. We have extended our imagined control of the world and in the process elevated our own status in relation to it. Such pleasures, I suspect, are short-lived and never enjoyed without some partial consciousness that they are delusions. For the complexity of the world soon presses in on us again, or a contradictory reduction solicits our attention.[82]

All of this brings us to a tipping point in how we might understand the relationship between satire and laughter. We already know what satire was supposed to do; but what did it do in fact? The answer, I believe, is entertain – but not in the sense that Dryden framed it. That entertainment was instead deeply affective: it was the pleasure of being put in a playful frame of mind. But it was also a pleasure in the decryption of scandal and backstory. Readers hungrily bought such muckraking satires and were equally implicated in the construction of satiric scandal. Vicesimus Knox, for instance, suspected a 'love of censure' was a major factor in readers' willingness to read satire.[83] The laughter that typifies such satire is not reformative or corrective, but the thrill of the giddy onlooker. To read and to understand a satire was, fundamentally, an aesthetic pleasure: a pleasure as an end in itself; a pleasure in the activity of decrypting the verbal ambiguity that underpinned a satire's humour and unearthing the lives that lay shabbily disguised behind it.[84] We should keep this affective response in mind when attempting to make sense of the gross disparity between the theory of disinterested satire propounded by Dryden and his successors but largely missing from the satiric practice of the canonical and non-canonical writers who followed in his wake. Satiric laughter did not reform its victims or readers – it only claimed and sounded like it did.

This all suggests that satire was nothing more than mere entertainment. Yet even Swift, one of Dryden's most trenchant critics, held out hope that satire could serve a reformative function.[85] Instruct and delight might have been the epigrammatic principle that explained how both satire and all forms of literature worked, but Swift was more interested in confounding and irritating than pleasing his readers. As he wrote to Pope, 'the chief end I propose to my self in all my labors is to vex the world rather then divert it'.[86] Such a claim was itself an attempt, at least in part, to trouble Pope, as Philip Harth has shown, by offering his own satiric persona in opposition

[82] Griffin, *Satire*: p. 168.

[83] V. Knox, *Essays Moral and Literary*, 2 vols (London, 1782), 2: p. 148.

[84] Andrew Benjamin Bricker, 'Libel and Satire: The Problem with Naming', *English Literary History*, 81/3 (2014): pp. 900–14.

[85] Ian Higgins, 'Dryden and Swift', *John Dryden (1631-1700): His Politics, His Plays, and His Poets*, ed. Claude Rawson and Aaron Santesso (Newark, 2004): pp. 217–34; and Michael Werth Gelber, *The Just and the Lively: The Literary Criticism of John Dryden* (Manchester, 1999): pp. 197–200.

[86] Swift to Pope, 29 September 1725, *Correspondence of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Harold Williams, 5 vols (Oxford, 1963–65), 2, p. 102.



to his friend and sometime collaborator's.[87] And indeed Swift was just as sceptical about satire as its archest critics, claiming like so many before and after him that 'Satyr is a sort of Glass, wherein Beholders do generally discover every body's Face but their Own'.[88] Yet Swift also remained confident that a satirist needed to possess a perverse willingness to upset readers, to provoke and trouble them. That provocation was necessary, Swift reasoned, because the Aristotelian definition of man as a rational animal ('*animal rationale*') only captured half the truth. Man, instead, was '*rationis capax*' – an animal capable of reason, but one in need of constant prodding.[89]

Swift's claim to vexation also contains in it the kernel of truth that his desire to upset his readers, to challenge rather than merely amuse or placate them, might be the key to an alternate theory of satire's reformative potential. Swift resisted easy conclusions, the kinds of black-and-white binaries that divide author and reader from victim and target. Swift's satires contain none of Pope's us-versus-them self-assurance: Tibbald was a fool, Dennis a raging lunatic, Addison a haughty double-dealer. So many of Swift's satires, instead, raise more questions than they answer. Think of the indecisive conclusion to the cultural war between the ancients and the moderns in *The Battel of the Books*; the slippery religious allegory and restless digressiveness of *A Tale of a Tub*; and, perhaps most famously, the disturbing misanthropy that seemingly overwhelms Gulliver after his departure from the Houyhnhnms and that has troubled commentators for almost three centuries.

Swift tends to leave his readers in a place of cognitive discomfort. That he provoked, undercut, stymied and vexed his readers is not a new observation; it has, instead, been a staple of Swift criticism for the last half-century.[90] But it is worth redeploying and rearticulating here if only to drive home a sense of his active desire to prevent an easy, friendly relationship between satirist and reader. Rather than inducing pleasing and playful paratelic states, Swift tends to produce in readers what Leon Festinger has called cognitive dissonance: he unsettles the natural human desire for internal consistency, forcing readers to engage with the slippery logic of his most provoking satires and, in turn, perhaps Swift hoped, to re-evaluate the received wisdom through which we all navigate our social, ethical and moral worlds.[91]

This is all to suggest that effective works of satire, if not satirists themselves, lack

[87] Philip Harth, 'Swift's Self-Image as a Satirist', *Proceedings of the First Münster Symposium on Jonathan Swift*, ed. Hermann J. Real and Heinz J. Vienken (Munich, 1985): p. 119.

[88] J. Swift, 'The Battel of the Books', in *A Tale of a Tub and Other Works*, ed. Marcus Walsh, *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jonathan Swift*, 17 vols (Cambridge, 2010–).

[89] Swift to Pope, 29 Sept. 1725, *Correspondence*, 3, p. 103.

[90] See, for instance, Robert M. Adams, *Strains of Discord: Studies in Literary Openness* (Ithaca, 1958): pp. 146–7; Edward W. Rosenheim. Jr., *Swift and the Satirist's Art* (Chicago, 1963): p. 49; Claude Rawson, *Gulliver and the Gentle Reader: Studies in Swift and Our Time* (London, 1973): pp. 1–32; Harth, 'Swift's Self-Image as a Satirist': p. 119; Brian A. Connery, 'The Persona as Pretender and the Reader as Constitutional Subject in Swift's *Tale*', *Cutting Edges: Postmodern Critical Essays on Eighteenth-Century Satire*, ed. James E. Gill (Knoxville, 1995): pp. 159–80; Frank Boyle, *Swift as Nemesis: Modernity and its Satirist* (Stanford, 2000): pp. 4–14; and Michael F. Suarez, 'Swift's Satire and Parody', *Cambridge Companion to Jonathan Swift*, ed. Christopher Fox (Cambridge, 2003): pp. 112–15.

[91] See L. Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford, 1957).

moral certainty; they deny their readers the easy laughter of satires that reward too readily with pleasure – the simple head-nodding agreement that undergirds works that offer complacent, incontrovertible conclusions. Instead, Swiftian works of satire discomfit readers, they force them to confront not only the work itself but also how that work challenges their own beliefs and assumptions. And Swift's satires, whether they raised howls of laughter or only shrugs of confusion, tended not to build but to subvert communities of readers. His satires vexed the world, forcing readers – perhaps even forcing us – to exercise the capacity for reason that Swift felt we all possessed, but all too rarely made use of.

# THE POWER OF LAUGHTER AND SATIRE IN EARLY MODERN BRITAIN

*Political and Religious Culture, 1500–1820*

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